

## **Continental Obstacles to Press Freedom**

*by Cheriff Sy, Publisher, Bendré, Burkina Faso*

Ladies and gentlemen,

I will make an economy for you on all the violations, the attempts to press freedom. With you, I have a thought for all our colleagues assassinated, and on whose cases impunity rules. With you, I have a solidarity & militant thought for our imprisoned colleagues, whose imprisonment is base on the arbitrary.

I would like with your permission, go ahead with the adversity against Medias. Among the numerous obstacles faced by the African media today, there are certain factors that play a more central role than others in hindering the development of a free media environment on the continent.

Today I would like to focus on two of these: the legal environment as well as the lack of appropriate training facilities for African media professionals. That these are two key obstacles will not come as news for anyone who knows the media scene in Africa, however, the time has come to look for solutions and take a concrete step forward in doing so. Unless we find a way of solving these issues, there is little hope for the future of the African media.

The time has also come for all actors on the African media scene to join forces in the efforts to create a new and different media climate on the continent, which would also have a huge impact on the political and economic development of the countries that would be the homes of a free press.

Amartya Sen, who has received the Nobel Prize in Economics, said: “No substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press.” It is in the interest of everyone to support the development of a free press, not the least in Africa.

Almost without an exception, most countries on the African continent operate in legally hostile environments. As long as journalists run the risk of facing charges of libel and defamation when they dare criticise the existing power structures, there is little or no chance for freedom of expression to evolve and flourish.

In a recent initiative, the World Association of Newspapers, which is the global organisation for the newspaper industry, launched the Declaration of Table Mountain campaign, which “calls on African Heads of State to review and abolish libel and defamation laws, where in force, and to promote and implement the highest standards of press freedom”. This is a very concrete initiative to make a change, and if fulfilled, it could dramatically improve the working conditions for journalists all over Africa.

We need initiatives like this one to allow for a change in the prevailing legal structures, and we all need to join those initiatives. The African Editors Forum is one of the over twenty organisations that have endorsed this initiative to date, and we hope to play an active role in its realisation.

The second obstacle I would like to focus on in this presentation is the lack of appropriate training facilities for media professionals throughout Africa. With training facilities I mean both journalism schools and training centres for practicing journalists.

In a vast majority of African countries the journalism schools, if there are any, lack in almost everything. They are inadequately equipped, the training does not focus on the actual craftsmanship of journalism and the students get little or no education in journalism ethics, including both their rights and obligations.

Furthermore, in Africa, where journalists often end up having managerial responsibilities once they start practicing their profession, students do not get even the most basic training in how to run a media company. This kind of training is not offered elsewhere either, which means that most small-sized media companies are financially extremely vulnerable due to a lack in professional skills and knowledge about how to run a media company.

The training in photojournalism, new media, investigative journalism is almost non-existent.

Working journalists get little or no training in the changing media environment, meaning that they have very limited possibilities to for example take advantage of new technological advances which could be of benefit for them.

Again, this is not rocket science. Already at a 1995 UNESCO conference, it was recognized that there was a need for re-examination of the communication training curricula in Africa "to bring them in line with emerging political, social, cultural and technological changes". The conference issued a recommendation, calling for "UNESCO, other international organisations and bilateral donors to assist African governments with the revision of existing programmes and curricula in African schools of journalism and communication training institutions".

I have no details about how this laudable initiative has developed since, however, what I do know is that African journalism schools today do not produce critical, curious and technically skilled media professionals.

This does not mean that there are no positive initiatives taking place in this area. A number of small projects do exist, including exchange and support programmes, however, I think a major effort is needed in this area. We are not even talking about a long-term investment here. If we invest in African journalism training now, it will take maybe three to four years before we get the first results. Few other development areas can guarantee results so quickly.

One very interesting project in this area is a UNESCO initiative to identify journalism schools throughout Africa that could become "centres of excellence," which would receive support to improve their standards and could serve as models for other journalism schools on the continent.

We truly need initiatives like this one, and there has to be a greater willingness to allocate resources to training the future generations of media professionals in Africa.

An emphasis should once again be put on working together, and bringing together all the existing knowledge (which is enormous) and canalise it in the best way possible.

There are many brave and highly professional journalists, editors, publishers, photographers, managers and other media professionals all over Africa. However, they are not enough, and they are fighting too big obstacles in their relentless efforts to create professional, independent media outlets. We owe them our support, and we, as Africans, owe Africa a free and independent press.

I would be happy to discuss any of the above in more detail with you after this session.

Thank you.